

Conflict Management

Principal Causes of Conflict:

- Communication failures:
 - Misunderstanding, not listening
 - Acting on assumptions
 - Being stuck on one preferred method or position
 - Seeing only limited resources
 - Either/or thinking; not exploring alternatives
- Personality characteristics, e.g.:
 - Protection of self-image (often due to not feeling valued, respected)
 - Defensiveness (often due to feeling unfairly criticized, attacked)
 - Learned habits of dealing with conflict (e.g., avoid, comply, attack)
- Lack of clarity about roles/responsibilities
- Incompatible values
- Goal differences
- Noncompliance with agreements or policies (can be positive if agreements or policies have become unnecessarily limiting)

THE KEY ELEMENT to increase choices for preventing and resolving conflicts is *naming* them. Focus on the problem, not the person: this involves an honest, open, and in-depth identification of areas of conflict and their patterns.

Five Conditions That Reduce Defensiveness:

1. Describe what is happening (instead of evaluating).
2. Collaborate on a solution (rather than controlling others/the situation).
3. Be free-flowing, spontaneous (instead of promoting your own agenda).
4. Show empathy (rather than indifference or neutrality).
5. Promote equality (instead of superiority).

THE MOST COMMON AND UNPRODUCTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAP: TRYING TO CHANGE THE OTHER PERSON. The key to conflict management is self-awareness. What are your needs, defenses, values, beliefs, blind spots? How can you be more self-disclosing? Less defensive? How can you be a better listener? More creative? More flexible? Handle criticism of others as you would a live bomb!

Strategies for Constructive Confrontation:

1. Put your tendency to judge on hold.
2. Avoid interpreting *motives* (comment only on the *effects* of others' behavior).
3. Deal with current, not past, behavior.
4. Pay attention to nonverbal behavior – make yours congruent with your positive intent; notice theirs to draw them out.
5. Be appropriately honest and open.
6. Take time when you need it.
7. Follow guidelines for effective feedback: be descriptive vs. judgmental, specific vs. general, and focus on the behavior, not the person.
8. Use "I" messages, not "you" messages.
9. Restate or paraphrase what you hear (active listening).
10. Look for underlying principles/values/objectives you hold in common.
11. Respond to criticism by agreeing to a partial truth, a possibility, or a principle; then probe for specifics. Don't be afraid to say, "You're right!"
12. Only ask questions if you truly want information (questions are often statements in disguise that convey implicit criticism).
13. Refrain from giving advice (teaching, preaching, explaining, commanding, suggesting).